

German Minorities Still Fight To Be Seen, Heard

by SYLVIA POGGIOLI

The first in a three-part series

Correction Jan. 16, 2009

Some versions of this story referred to Neukoelln as a "suburb" of Berlin. It's actually one of Berlin's 12 boroughs.



Sean Gallup/Getty Images

Young Muslim women chat after attending afternoon prayers at a predominantly Turkish mosque in Berlin in October 2008. Turks are the biggest minority group in Germany, with an estimated 3 million. Yet it was less than a decade ago that Germany abolished the law limiting citizenship only to those with German blood.

More In The Series

Most Europeans were thrilled when Barack Obama was elected U.S. president. But when Europeans ask themselves, "Could a member of one of our own minorities be elected head of state?" the honest answer is: "Not any time soon." NPR's Sylvia Poggioli explains why in a three-part series reported from Germany, Italy and France.

Overview: Obama's Election Prompts Soul-Searching In Europe
Jan. 9, 2009

Part 2: Immigrants Forced



January 12, 2009

text size **A A A**

In Europe, Barack Obama's election as president of the United States was met with euphoria. But now, the continent is peering into the mirror, realizing there is little chance a member of one of its own minorities could reach such prominence any time soon.

Take Germany, for instance, where notions of national identity are still strictly linked to ethnicity. Nonwhite Germans are still fighting to overcome exclusion from mainstream society in many ways.

A 'Monoracial' Country

In a small theater club in Berlin's Neukoelln district, author Sharon Otoo stands on a small stage and, in front of a young, mixed-race audience, reads a work about the lives of black Germans.

The daughter of Ghanaian parents, Otoo is angered that German society labels her and the estimated half-million Afro-Germans as foreigners — or treats them as nonexistent.

"When you take white as the norm, and everything else is deviant from that, and your advertising is always targeted at white people, or when you write school books and they're targeted at white children, this is, for me, a racist experience," she says.

Otoo is part of a group that monitors racism in the media, repeatedly denouncing ads depicting minorities as comical figures and newspapers' use of physical attributes to describe different races.

Another member is Carl Camurca, son of a German mother and an African-American father. He identifies culturally with the land of the poet Goethe but says he is repeatedly stopped by police demanding to see his permit to be in Germany.

"White Germans do not perceive themselves as racist at all. The idea is there are no other races in Germany. Germany is a monoracial country so we can't be racist. It's pretty easy," Camurca says.



Reporter's Notebook:
 'Obama Effect' Instills
 Sinan Senyurt, 23, was
 born in Berlin district
 Jan. 12, 2009.
 and a Green Party member.
 His grandparents came
 from Turkey and he is one
 of the few minority
 elected officials in Germany.
 But it was less than a decade ago that Germany abolished the law granting citizenship only to those
 with German blood.
 election of Barack Obama

Despite New Citizenship Rules, Old Attitudes Persist

There is no national debate on racism. Yet surveys consistently show most Germans don't want foreigners in their country. And there have been — on average — 17 race-related killings annually in recent years.

Turks — the biggest minority group at nearly 3 million — are in their fourth generation.

But it was less than a decade ago that Germany abolished the law granting citizenship only to those with German blood.

And even the official, newly coined term "people of migrant origin" reflects a reluctance to accept that one-fifth of the population is not of German stock.

There are hardly any minorities in the mainstream media, police, judiciary or politics.

On The Outside Looking In

One of the few minority elected officials is 23-year-old Green Party member Sinan Senyurt, whose grandparents came from Turkey. The councilor of a Berlin district, Senyurt insists he is fully German.

"Calling me 'of migrant descent' is a subtle way to separate me from them. It's discrimination," he says.

"I was born here, so why do people tell me I am disadvantaged just because my grandparents were migrants? Maybe I am not a pure German, so call me a new German."

The 'Exclusion Barrier'

John Matip Eichler was born in Leipzig, son of a German woman and an exchange student from Cameroon — a father he hardly knew. He says racism was as intense in communist East Germany as in the West.

Life was difficult for his mother and others like her, he notes, using the word *rassenschande*, or "shame of race." Having relations with nonwhites — and particularly with blacks — was taboo and considered shameful to a woman's entire family. Sometimes, these women were forced to give their children to orphanages, Eichler says.

His mother defied society and raised her mixed-race son on her own. But since the fall of communism, an outbreak of racist violence in the former East Germany has made it an area that's too dangerous for minorities, so Eichler won't let his children take school trips there.

And throughout Germany, he says, people still ask him, "Where are you from?" — with the unspoken follow-up, "When are you going back?"

Jan Techau of the German Council on Foreign Relations says the German concept of identity is based on exclusion.

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Michael James

@ Heidi Miller: "Stop with the holocaust or ask your self what happened to the indigenous people."

What happened to the Herrero tribe in German Southwest Africa.

Heidi Miller

I was born in 1966 in Germany to a German mother and American GI father. My parents were never married, but my father and mother lived together in Germany until my dad passed away in 1988.

I moved to the US in 1989, my mom and brother still live in Germany. I go visit them at least every two years and must say that I have noticed a decline in "tolerance" over the past few years. My mom tells me that it started after the wall fell and citizens of the former DDR realized that milk and honey did not flow in abundance in the west. It seems that the youth, as employment and housing disappeared, needed a scapegoat and who better to blame than people that don't look like you and me. Sad, but the economic situation, like in the US, is seemingly always a good reason to point fingers and distribute blame.